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The National Endowment for the Humanities is now taking its turn as the focus of controversy. It's accused of a traditionalist bias in projects related to the 500th anniversary of Columbus' landing.

Critics say Lynne M. Chenev, the NEH's head, is spurning controversial projects that have been praised by review panels

A new cultural clash

By Stephan Salisbury
Inquirer Staff Writer

For the last two years, as squalls of controversy battered arts policies of the federal government, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) managed to remain high and dry and remote from turmoil.

But now it appears there's trouble in paradise.

A public debate has broken out this spring, pitting the government's pre-eminent agency for funding historical and other cultural projects against large segments of the community of scholars and others who initiate and carry the projects out.

Proposed television documentaries, public exhibitions and other events tied to the 500th anniversary of the landing of Christopher Columbus in the New World are the principal focus of this debate.

Critics contend that Lynne V. Cheney, head of the endowment since 1986, has torpedoed several splashy projects solely for political reasons. These critics argue that the NEH is promoting a pre-eminently European and conservative view of the so-called Age of Exploration while closeting the views of Native Americans and scholars concerned with the effect of European voyaging on non-European peoples.

The NEH rejections have occurred, the critics maintain, despite high marks given the proposals by the agency's review panels of experts.

The spurned projects all seem to share a nontraditional or multicultural approach and take a less-than-celebratory look at the effects of European expansion into the New World, all reflections of recent scholarship. As a result, some critics argue that the



The traditional view of Columbus is challenged by many rejected proposals.

endowment is exhibiting an increasingly conservative bias in its grant-giving in general. Other critics say that the agency fears being drawn into any kind of controversy.

"There are two issues involved here," said Lois Scharf, executive director of National History Day, a nonprofit organization that sponsors educational programs and seminars for secondary-school students and faculty. "One is the institutional process of the endowment. How does it work? How are grants made? What role does peer review play? What role does the [National Council

on the Humanities, a reviewing board] play? What role does the chairman play? How political, in the end, should the chairman be? ...

"The other issue is this broad-ranging intellectual debate going on, particularly in the humanities, over content, perspective ... the whole issue of diversity, multiculturalism, globalism. ... I believe Lynne Cheney has taken a position on the side of the traditionalists [celebrating Europe]. ... She is funding or she is not funding according to where she sits on this great scholarly issue."

The controversial project rejections are few compared with the nearly 270 Columbus-related grants made by the NEH as of July 1990, the date of the most recent computer counts. Each of the rejected projects, however, is a high-profile, big-ticket item aimed at audiences outside scholarly preserves.

"If you kill one big first-rate project, that's all it takes to send a message," said Stanley Katz, executive director of the American Council of Learned Societies, an umbrella association of scholarly groups.

In one instance, *1492—Clash of Visions*, a four-part television mini-series portraying non-European empires flourishing at the time of the Columbus voyages, was denied a \$500,000 production and script-writing grant last fall by Cheney. The series, which was supported by an advisory committee of eminent historians, had already received two NEH grants totaling about \$100,000, and the production proposal had been lauded by an NEH peer panel and several outside experts.

Nevertheless, in September producer Yanna K. Brandt and others involved in the project were informed by the NEH that the project would not be funded because of its "lack of even-handedness." The endowment's letter of rejection said the series downplayed "distressing aspects" of Aztec culture, such as human sacrifice, while highlighting Spanish brutality.

One segment in the series portrays the Aztec and Spanish empires through two characters — a fictional Aztec merchant and Columbus. It is this segment that caused most concern at the agency.

Nancy L. Roelker, a visiting professor of history at Brown University who chaired (See **ENDOWMENT** on 4C)

Humanities agency accused of bias

ENDOWMENT, from 1-C the *Clash of Visions* advisory committee, said she traveled to Washington last September to discuss the reasons behind the rejection with Cheney. According to Roelker, Cheney complained that the segment "glamorized our Aztec hero" while tainting Columbus with the charge of "genocide." Roelker added that Cheney had argued that Italian- and Hispanic-Americans would be "up in arms" if the endowment funded the project.

"You see, from our point of view, [Cheney] has got it absolutely wrong," said Roelker. "We're the people who have the balanced program between the Europeans and non-Europeans, and she's the one who has gone off the deep end in a reactionary direction."

On the matter of Columbus and genocide, Brandt argued that the characterization belonged to historian Samuel Eliot Morison, "the number-one proponent of Columbus."

Cheney declined to be interviewed for this article, but she has defended her decision on *Clash of Visions*, arguing that the series "offered a highly negative view of Columbus."

She has also noted that the endowment's guidelines for public programs require that applicants strive for balance and fairness in their projects.

"They declare Columbus guilty of genocide, where's the balance?" argued Jerry L. Martin, NEH assistant chairman for programs and policy.

Martin said Cheney's remarks regarding the response of Italian- and Hispanic-Americans to *Clash of Visions* had been misunderstood. "The point of it is that we do have a pluralistic society and this makes issues of fairness and balance and objectivity especially important," he said. "The point isn't that we might upset someone. The point is that we might be unfair."

In March 1988, NEH program officers suggested that producers of another television mini-series project, *The Buried Mirror*, written and narrated by Mexican novelist and diplomat Carlos Fuentes, apply for an endowment grant.

Peggy K. Liss, a Washington-based historian coordinating the project, said she was initially reluctant to apply because of Fuentes' well-known political hassles with the U.S. government. For years, the State Department refused to issue visas to the leftist best-selling author of *Terra Nova* and *The Old Gringo*.

But the NEH program officers "thought it was a very nice project and said, 'Please submit it,'" Liss recalled. "*The Buried Mirror* is basically a cultural history. It's about Spanish America. It's also about



Writer of unfunded mini-series

Spain and Hispanics in the U.S. It's about roots, if you will."

In August '88, Liss was told she had been refused funding, despite the fact that peer-review panelists gave the project "glowing recommendations," she said.

"I was told," Liss recalled, "that it was turned down at the highest levels."

Why? "I don't know," said Liss. "We do show that the Spaniards weren't very nice. We do show pluses and minuses."

Martin, the NEH's program and policy administrator, said *The Buried Mirror* was faulted not for its political perspective but because it lacked diversity in its approach. "In general, we do not support programs where there's one point of view," Martin said.

The mini-series has also begun to attract political heat from Republicans on Capitol Hill. On May 15, Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska lambasted the Smithsonian, which funded the Fuentes project after the NEH dropped it. Stevens said he had been told the series contained allegations of "genocide" and he characterized Fuentes as "a noncitizen" and "a Mexican Marxist," according to the Washington Post. Smithsonian officials defended the program, which will air on PBS next year.

Douglas Foard, a former NEH staff member who is now secretary of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and a board member of National History Day, said the NEH had grown increasingly cautious in recent years.

"When the present chairman came in, I don't think she was that familiar with the whole subject of the [Columbus] encounter. When she found out it was potentially a minefield, I think the agency backed away from

the controversy," he said.

Martin, NEH program chief, said this was not the case.

"The fact that a grant might be controversial is simply never a factor in decisions," he said. "We've funded all kinds of public programs. ... We feel we can do that as long as different points of view are represented."

Glen Morris, an associate professor of political science at the University of Colorado at Denver, said a symposium he was putting together on the future of indigenous peoples in the Americas was considered "potentially inflammatory and divisive" by the NEH.

"That's what I was told by our project officer," said Morris. "... They said it was the issues that were inflammatory and divisive, not us, not our approach."

In at least three other cases, proposals for Columbus quinquennial projects have been rejected for NEH funding despite the fact that the proposals received excellent marks from peer-review panels, according to applicants. One examined how myths are formed and history distorted. Two others focused on experiences of Native Americans.

In all three instances, the applicants declined to speak on the record, citing the possibility of retribution by agency officials. "I'm a coward, frankly," said one applicant. "Our reliance on the NEH is complete."

This is almost literally true. The NEH, with a \$178 million budget proposed for fiscal 1992, is by far the single largest source of non-university funding for humanities projects. According to William G. Bowen, president of the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the 30 largest private foundations in the country, taken as a group, make grants "to the humanities in a given year that are less than half the grants made by the NEH alone."

Alienating the NEH, then, can have considerable consequences to scholars. Cheney is well-known for her temper and she is not afraid of expressing displeasure when she feels her stewardship has been falsely maligned.

After an article regarding ill-fated Columbus projects appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Cheney made angry telephone calls to a number of critics identified in the story, including David Van Tassel of National History Day.

Earlier this year, the NEH shot down a \$600,000 grant that would have funded five National History Day teacher institutes. Instead, the NEH is funding one. Scharf, a colleague of Van Tassel's, said she was convinced that the NEH had backed

away from the program because it was "clearly labeled 'global and multicultural perspectives on the Columbus quinquennial.'" Scharf was amazed by the Cheney telephone call to Van Tassel.

"She did say something to the effect that 'it will be a cold day in hell before I lift a finger for you again,'" said Scharf.

Samuel Gammon, executive director of the American Historical Association, introduced Nancy Roelker, of *Clash of Visions*, to Cheney. He got a phone call, too.

"I was being scolded for having such disreputable friends," joked Gammon. "I don't think [Cheney] holds grudges in the sense that she says, 'I'm going to get that person.' She does, unquestionably, as anybody would, say, 'You have to be careful about that crowd. They're a little bit odd.'"

These critical private calls have their public parallel, many critics believe, in the dispute over Carol Iannone, a conservative, Cheney-backed nominee to the National Council on the Humanities. The 30,000-member Modern Language Association (MLA), a group of university professors of literature and languages, is among several organizations that have criticized the nomination, saying Iannone is unqualified.

This has led to a barrage of public denunciations of the MLA by powerful conservatives such as columnist George Will.

Critics argue that such a charged atmosphere is inimical to the spirit of free inquiry, particularly since the decision-making process at the NEH is shrouded in secrecy.

Applications go into the agency and are evaluated by peer panels. Then the proposals go to the National Council on the Humanities, the agency's largest reviewing body. Small council committees review proposals, which are then approved by the full council. Cheney has ultimate authority to determine whether an application lives or dies.

This entire process is secret. An applicant may see the comments of peer-review panelists, but the identity of those panelists is kept secret, despite repeated congressional requests that the NEH identify panelists by specific panels.

"When it comes to Lynne Cheney and the council, their accountability is really zilch; they can do anything they want," said Peggy Liss, of *The Buried Mirror*.

"What's wrong with the NEH? When you get a scholarly community at odds with a national humanities program, you don't get good proposals, people are not concerned, and dialogue and debate are not there."